

Hustings Courthouse  
Courthouse Ave. and N. Sycamore St.  
Petersburg  
Virginia

HABS No. VA-657

HABS  
VA  
27-PET  
29.

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

## HUSTINGS COURTHOUSE

Location: Courthouse Avenue and North Sycamore Street,  
Petersburg, Virginia

Present Owner: City of Petersburg, City Hall, Petersburg,  
Virginia

Present Occupant: Hustings Court

Present Use: Courthouse

Brief Statement  
of Significance:

This Classic Revival Courthouse, designed by Calvin Pollard of New York and built 1838-1840, is architecturally noteworthy because of its improvisations on, and combinations of, different classical themes on the exterior. On the interior, the original hung plaster ceiling in the second floor courtroom is an impressive feature. During the 1864-1865 siege of Petersburg, Union troops used the tower for a sighting mark and both Confederates and Federals relied upon the clock in the tower as a time-piece.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION:

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1838-1840 /Record of Council, City of Petersburg, 7/1/1835-5/3/1853, June 14, 1838, February 1, 1840. Handwritten bound manuscripts in the City Council Clerk's Office, City Hall, Petersburg./
2. Architect, etc.: Calvin Pollard of New York, Architect; Daniel Lyon and Beverly Drinkard of Petersburg, Contractor; 1838-1840. /Record of Council, City of Petersburg, 7/1/1835-5/3/1853, March 1, 1835. Handwritten bound manuscripts in the City Council Clerk's Office, City Hall, Petersburg./ The 1965-66 additions and renovations were done by Gordon B. Galusha of Petersburg, Architect; Burgess Construction & Contracting Company, Contractor. /The Courthouse of the Hustings Court of Petersburg, Virginia (Petersburg, September, 1966), p.2./

HABS  
VA  
27 PET,  
29-

3. Original and subsequent owners: The following deed references are taken from the Deed Books in the Clerk's Office of Hustings Court at Petersburg.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Grantor</u>	<u>Grantee</u>
7/17/1787 Book 1 page 351	Bolling, Mary Robert Jr.	Town of Petersburg
10/17/1794 Book 2 page 349	Bolling Robert	Town of Petersburg
6/14/1808 Book 10 page 479	Bolling, Robert Ann	Town of Petersburg

4. Notes on original plan and construction of building:  
"Originally, the first floor was divided into three rooms - two on either side of a corridor which extended half way through the building and a third large room at the rear. In relatively recent times, this large room was partitioned to make four small rooms." /The Courthouse of the Hustings Court of Petersburg, Virginia (Petersburg, September, 1966), p. 1./
5. Alterations and additions: Extensive repairs were made in 1877.

The following description of the 1965-1966 work is also taken from The Courthouse of the Hustings Court of Petersburg, Virginia: The recent addition to the rear of the building (approximately 30 feet) is designed in the same style as the original building with identical details on the exterior. The addition provides, on the first floor, a library stack room, a boiler room, an extension of the hallway and a rear stairway and, on the second floor, a jury room, a conference room, judge's chambers and a hallway. A small elevator has been installed in the addition. The work on the exterior included covering the walls with a new layer of stucco and resurfacing the columns.

The interior of the original portion of the building has been renovated throughout - with new floors, walls and ceiling - with the exception that the old ceiling in the courtroom has been preserved. New heating, air conditioning and lighting systems have been installed throughout the building. In the courtroom, new rails, jury box,

judge's bench and pilasters behind the judge's bench have been built. New furnishings, draperies and carpeting have been placed throughout the building.

The old one-pane window sashes have been replaced by new sashes with smaller panes which are believed to be the type originally used in the building. Lighting fixtures for the front stair hall and the courtroom were specially designed to conform to the period of the building's architecture. These include classical details appropriate to the period.

Structural changes inside the building were few. Among them was the removal of some embellishing and other features that are believed to have been included in an extensive renovation program that followed the War Between the States."

6. Important old views: Published photograph in Miller, Francis Trevelyan, ed. The Photographic History of the Civil War in Ten Volumes (New York: The Review of Reviews Company, 1912), Vol. III, p. 301. This photograph has been reproduced for the HABS collection.

B. Historical Events and Persons Associated with the Building:

/from The Courthouse of the Hustings Court of Petersburg, Virginia./

The Hustings Court of Petersburg came into being in 1784 - six years before the Supreme Court of the United States convened for the first time in New York. The first charter of the town of Petersburg provided that the mayor, recorder and aldermen, or any four of them, shall have the power to hold a court of hustings on the first Monday in every month. In later years, justices supplanted aldermen on the court. At the first meeting of the court, held on October 6, 1784, in the house of William Durrell; John Bannister, Mayor, Christopher McConnico, Recorder, and four aldermen were present. The house of William Durrell was a tavern and for the next nine years the court held its sessions in taverns because it had no courthouse. Finally, in 1793, the new courthouse was completed. This first courthouse, a frame structure, stood just south of the site of the present courthouse. Beside it, where the present courthouse stands, an Episcopal church was constructed during 1803-1805. A local writer, complaining in no uncertain terms of the inappropriateness of the location of the church, gives us a vivid picture of the courthouse's surroundings. He said:

We find it (the new Episcopal Church) on a small confined hill, nearly in the center of the town, surrounded by houses, contiguous to one of the most frequent taverns and public streets of this place, and also a tobacco inspection. It nearly touches the courthouse in which is kept a clerk's office. Wagons, carts and all kinds of carriages, crowds of people on horseback, and on foot, are almost constantly passing under your immediate view. The noisy and busy tumult of the neighborhood must eternally interrupt and divide the attention of the audience. The gallows, town and county district jail are in front of the church, and so near as to be within the hearing of the groans and lamentations of prisoners condemned to punishment by the just sentence of law.

The courthouse square, which originally fronted on Sycamore Street, was conveyed to the town by Robert Bolling in 1794. A part of the consideration was that the courthouse and jail belonging to said town, and judicial proceedings of the said town shall be continued to be kept and held upon said premises. In 1820 Robert Bolling brought a suit in which he complained that the town had removed the jail 'from the street' to a place near his dwelling and had disposed of lots on the street to persons 'who had erected houses thereon.' Mr. Bolling claimed that these actions were in violation of the intent of his deed and he asked that the town be enjoined from using the property for purposes not stated in the deed. But the case was finally decided against Mr. Bolling by the Supreme Court of Appeals in 1837. (In recent years the City of Petersburg has been reacquiring the lots on Sycamore Street that were disposed of over the protest of Mr. Bolling.)

In 1837 the town council began making plans for a new courthouse which would provide not only a courtroom but also a clerk's office, city offices and a meeting place for the council. Contracts for construction of the new building were awarded Daniel Lyon and Beverly Drinkard. C. Pollard of New York was employed as architect. The Episcopal church was removed from its uncongenial surroundings and the new courthouse rose on its site. The old frame courthouse was moved to Ettrick where it served as a tenement house until 1910.

The new courthouse, which had been substantially completed by the end of 1839, looked down on a prosperous town of about 11,000 population. Since the great fire of 1815, which had swept away two-thirds of the town's buildings

(mostly frame), a town of durable brick buildings had grown up around the courthouse. Petersburg was now a thriving trading center for a wide area that extended into North Carolina. Ships crowded the harbor and three railroads entered the town. Tobacco, cotton and a variety of small manufactories were the backbone of its economy. The 1830's were a period of great prosperity (except when the nation was shaken by the Panic of 1837). The Petersburg of that distant day - Scottish though many were - stinted little in building their new courthouse.

The tower on the courthouse has had an interesting history. It was not included in the original plans but was added when it was found that a structure to house a bell and clock was needed. The clock has been the object of slurring remarks as far back as 1853 when it was referred to as our municipal turnip and as getting ahead of the sun today and behind tomorrow and it was soundly criticized for its perfectly uncontrolled ways in striking the hour. It was no better in 1859. By then the clock had lost whatever 'Claim it had to respectability' and people were 'rapidly withdrawing all confidence as they had ever been rash enough to place in it.' In 1870 it was observed by the press that the clock might strike but it was certain not to keep time and it was asked if 'the steeple was not so shaky that a hard wind would cause it to vibrate?' Finally, in 1880, the 40-year-old clock was replaced by a new one which was illuminated by gas-light; electric lighting came in 1887. But it cannot be said the new clock has had a perfect record for striking and keeping time through the years. Even the goddess of Justice that surmounts the tower has had her troubles. In 1880 she was given a pair of scales which she had for some time needed. The habit the scales have of getting out of balance has been the subject of cruel jests. They were entirely swept away by a hurricane several years ago and were never recovered but they were replaced by a new set, which like its predecessor, has not always successfully filled its role as a symbol of evenhanded justice.

However unhappy their history, the tower and clock had the good fortune during the siege of Petersburg (1864-1865) to escape damage by Union army shells - although the courthouse itself was struck several times. One shell severed a girder, causing the roof to be lowered several inches. The clock seems to have enjoyed a period of respectability during the siege; it is said that both the Confederate and Union armies relied on it as a timepiece. Some sessions of the city council were held in the South Ward firehouse on Halifax Street during the siege but the court appears to have held its sessions with regularity in the courthouse. On April 2,

1865, the army of Northern Virginia left Petersburg and the city was soon overrun by the Union Army. The sound of gunfire which had reverberated across the city for ten months suddenly ended. On Saturday, April 8, John C. Armistead, Clerk of the Hustings Court, sadly recorded in his minute book: 'The army of General Grant having possession of the city and there being no occasion for the meeting of the court pursuant to its adjournment, the court failed to meet and the facts are entered of record.'

- C. Supplemental Data taken from Wyatt, Edward IV, "Justice and Legislation Occupy Courthouse Here For Not Quite A Century," The Progress-Index, Petersburg, November 17, 1935, p. 2, c.2./

The council on August 1, 1837, instructed a committee to consider the wisdom and probable cost of a new courthouse and to select a site for it. This committee reported on October 2 that it considered the present courthouse site, then occupied by the old courthouse to be the most eligible one. It was then authorized to purchase for \$4,000 the property of the Episcopal church, provided the trustees could give a clear title. Purchase of this property was reported on January 11, 1838.

On April 2, 1838, the council instructed the committee to advertise in the newspapers of Petersburg and Richmond for proposals for constructing the edifice at a cost not to exceed \$21,000, simultaneously it decided to finance it by issuing certificates paying six per cent interest and redeemable at various times for a period of years.

C. Pollard, a New York architect, was reported, March 1, to have agreed to draw plans, whereupon the committee was instructed on receiving them to submit them to local 'mechanics' to ascertain the minimum cost for which the courthouse could be built and to enquire of Mr. Pollard under what terms he would agree to supervise the construction.

In the meantime the committee was negotiating with Robert Bolling to acquire his reversionary right in the property, and also to acquire an additional strip of land regarded as necessary. These he agreed to sell for \$2,000, and the committee on June 14, presented a deed from him....

June 14, 1838, was a day of much activity in regard to the proposed courthouse. The council decided to employ Mr. Pollard and pay him \$1,000 and his expenses to and from New York. Likewise it accepted the bids of Daniel Lyon and Beverly

Drinkard to build the courthouse for \$20,100. They were to receive \$5,000 when the first timbers were laid, a like sum when the walls were completed, \$4,000 when the building was 'covered in', and the rest when the courthouse should be finished and received by the committee. Further details of finance were likewise arranged.

Sufficient progress had been made by October 1, 1839, for the council to begin thinking of furniture, and it authorized the committee on public property to purchase chairs, tables, and stoves for the courthouse, jury rooms, clerk's offices, and council, all of which were to be located in the building. At the same time it decided to sell the old courthouse as soon as its successor could be occupied.

The council on December 2 authorized the committee to receive the building as soon as it should be completed except for flagstones, the laying of which was to wait upon the proper season for such work.

However, on February 1, 1840, it was so nearly finished that authorization was made of a payment of \$4,000 in city scrip to the contractors when the building should be ready for use. The town chamberlain was instructed to insure it in the Mutual Assurance Company. On April 1, 1840, we find the council authorizing additional keys for the jailor and for the clerks of the two courts who were to occupy it. The town sergeant was ordered to lock the building every night after ringing of the bells. June 1, the council acted favorably on the petition of the Franklin Literary Society which sought to hold its July 4th debates in the new building.

The tower or steeple, regarded by many as the most beautiful feature of the structure, was not included in the original plan, for on April 1, 1839, the committee was instructed to enquire into the best mode of erecting a building on the square to house the clock and bells. On May 17, it was recommended that this structure be made part of the courthouse; June 1, Beverly Drinkard's bid of \$2,500 for constructing a steeple was accepted.

A word should be said for Major Daniel Lyon and Captain Beverly Drinkard, preeminent among the builders of their day. The former was long identified with the various interests in the city and served it as mayor. Captain Drinkard a somewhat older man, was one of the founders of the Petersburg Benevolent Mechanics Association and a veteran of the War of 1812. Other monuments to their skill are



old Washington Street Methodist Episcopal Church and Mechanics' Hall, replaced by the present Union Trust Building. Captain Drinkard achieved the ripe age of 83 years and Major Lyon that of 80 years. Their deaths were recorded by the Index-Appeal with profound sorrow.

Returning to the subject of the courthouse, we find the council beautifying the square as the building neared completion. The lot was graded, and walled in, and a flight of stone steps constructed.

Prepared by Randall J. Biallas  
University of Illinois, Urbana  
August 1968

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION:

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Courthouse, built during the classic Revival period, is noteworthy for its classic columns with Doric shafts, Corinthian Capitals derived from the Temple of the Winds, and for its classic pediment. Also of note on the exterior is the clock tower. On the interior the most significant space is the courtroom, with handsome detailing on walls and ceiling.
2. Condition of fabric: Good; has recently (1965) been added on to. There has also been other recent remodeling of the original building.

B. Detailed Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions and shape: Rectangular, overall dimensions, approximately 100' x 50'. The original building was about 70' x 50'. It is two stories high plus a small basement.
2. Foundations: Brick
3. Wall construction: Brick in the original. The walls are surfaced with stucco and scored ashlar finish. New stucco was put on all exterior in recent remodeling. The color is cream. The addition walls are concrete block, stuccoed.

4. Chimneys: None
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: There are two exterior entrances, one at the front and one at the rear, on the first floor. A third doorway opens onto the second floor balcony under the front portico. The front entrance is a double door, each door having six (6) recessed panels. There are two (2) large panels above the door and enframing all of this is a large granite frame and lintel. The lintel is curved up and peaked in the middle on the top side. The total frame stands about 15' high. Directly above this is the small balcony with iron railings, which is entered from the second floor through a double door. At the rear is a single door.
  - b. Windows and shutters: There are no windows on the west (front) facade. The first floor windows on the sides and rear are double hung with six lights per sash, granite sill, and are set back in the wall about 9". The second floor windows are similar but smaller and have only four lights per sash.
6. Porches: A handsome raised portico is at the front - approximately 10' deep and 50' wide. Five granite steps lead up to the porch level.
7. Structural system: All walls, exterior and interior, were originally brick (bearing). The roof structure is a system of large wood trusses, each member being about 4" x 12". The pitch is shallow, about 4 or 5 feet in 50', and the trusses span the entire width of the building (clear span) in the courtroom. Walls in addition are concrete block construction. Floor and roof construction are not known.
8. Roof shape and covering: Gabled, tin covering.
9. Cornice: A large, ornately molded, projecting cornice extends around the building.
10. Towers: The clock tower, according to the pamphlet: THE COURTHOUSE of the HUNTINGS COURT of PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA was "added as an afterthought during construction, and because it was not anticipated in the original design, the tower sits awkwardly on the roof. Generally when a tower was built on a temple type building the tower base

projected onto the porch, giving the effect of supporting the tower. This is not true here. The tower appears to be supported by the roof. It has been said that the tower was inspired by Sir Christopher Wren's tower on St. Mary-Le-Bow in London, but there is little or no resemblance between these two towers." The tower is divided into five parts, a solid base, a series of 8 columns, a solid portion, 8 more columns and topped by the four-sided clock and a figure symbolizing justice.

C. Detailed Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: There is a basement only under the porch and the front part of the building, about 20' x 50'. It is divided into two parts, each about 10' wide and separated by a brick wall (support for the front exterior wall of the building) with an opening on it to permit passage from one area to another. It is now a records storage area. Access is from the stairs leading from the first floor.
  - b. First floor: The first floor was originally divided into three rooms - one on either side of a corridor which extended halfway through the building and a third large room at the rear. This large room has now been partitioned off into four small rooms.
  - c. Second floor: The original portion of the building has a foyer area at front and a large courtroom, about 50' x 50', and two small anterooms at the rear.
  - d. Addition: The addition of 1965 provides, on the first floor, a library stack room, a boiler room, an extension of the hallway and a rear stairway; and on the second floor, a jury room, a conference room, judge's chamber and a hallway. A small elevator has also been installed in the addition.
2. Stairways: One on each side of the first floor entry. Both lead to the second floor foyer. A separate staircase under one of these leads to the basement and, as previously mentioned, there is a new staircase in the addition.
  3. Flooring: The basement floor is in concrete, the other floors are all wood. The present floors were installed during the renovation. The courtroom itself has carpeting installed over the floor.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: All walls and ceilings throughout are painted plaster with the exception of the basement, with brick walls and exposed joist ceiling. All plaster is new with the exception of the courtroom ceiling, which has been retained but restored.
5. Doorways and doors: Doors and trim on both floors are similar with the exception of the double door leading to the courtroom. The trim flares out at the top to form a lintel wider than the width of the door.
6. Details and trim: Of primary interest is the detailing in the courtroom area. The courtroom itself was completely remodeled in recent times and new rails, jury box, judge's bench and pilasters behind the judge's bench have been built. Substantially the same, however, is the magnificently detailed plaster ceiling with its large scooped out circular dome at the center. Fanning out 360 are 20 recessed panels. This gives the ceiling an undulating effect. This center "scooped out" portion is greatly detailed and ornamented with egg and dart moulding and other details. The ceiling is a slight four-way arch, the ends of which come into the four corners of the room. In each corner, in a triangular space formed by the circular fan and the corner of the room, there is also ornate moulding including a large flowered detail. Also of note in the room is the curved apse behind the judge's bench area, which formerly projected out in a curved pattern similar to the apse, but now is rectangular.
7. Lighting: Modern; a large ornate chandelier now hangs from the center of the courtroom. A gas-burning chandelier, which hung here originally, was replaced.
8. Heating: Central air, modern. Formerly there were gas heaters with air passed through registers in the walls.

D. Site and Surroundings:

1. Orientation and general setting: The building is oriented southwest and sits on a hill in the downtown area. There are no high buildings around it and the courthouse has a very stately and dignified appearance. Courthouse Ave. runs up to within 100' of the building and is on axis. At the end of the street there are large concrete pillars and a series of steps up an embankment to an area which then rises gradually to the courthouse steps. There are several small brick buildings clustered around, dating from the mid-19th Century.

2. Landscaping and walks: The wide walk up to the front steps is brick, as are the other walks around the front and sides of the building. There are two lamp posts in front. Landscaping is primarily in front with large shrubs but no large trees.

Prepared by John M. McRae  
Supervisor Architect  
Historic American  
Buildings Survey  
August 1968

### PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records are part of the documentation made during the 1968 Petersburg Summer Project, undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with The Historic Petersburg Foundation, Inc., with financial assistance from The Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission. During the summer, records were made of twenty-two buildings in the city.

The project was under the general direction of James C. Massey, Chief, Historic American Buildings Survey. Project Supervisor was John M. McRae of the University of Florida. The recording team was composed of Randall J. Biallas, historian (University of Illinois, Urbana), and student assistant architects Michael Hamilton (University of Arizona), Thomas J. Sanford (Washington State University), and Edwin S. Smith, Jr. (Rhode Island School of Design). Photographs were made by George Eisenman.